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ALBERTA BIRD ATLAS NEWSLETTER

A Project of the Federation of Alberta Naturalists

Vol. 3, No. 2 | Editor: H. Loney Dickson | Executive Director: Jack Clements | Winter, 1989
ISSN 0833-773X

ALBERTA BIRD ATLAS DAY—1989

"In a province well-known for its tremendous volunteer spirit, over 2000 volunteers will be documenting the nesting and breeding areas of the more than 250 bird species that frequent Alberta. This is a worthy project that many Albertans should support."

Those were the words of the Honourable LeRoy Fjordbotten, Minister of Forestry, Lands and Wildlife on 20 June 1989 when he announced the designation of 24 June 1989 as the second annual Alberta Bird Atlas Day.

The day turned out to be a big success as can be seen from the few sample regional area reports on the day:

VERMILION-WAINWRIGHT

On Alberta Bird Atlas Day 15 Atlassers from the Vermilion-Wainwright Region spent 4.5 hours atlassing around David Lake which is south of the Wainwright Armed Forces Base. We concentrated our efforts near the Lake and, in its aspen fringe we spotted 49 species of birds including a sandhill crane, (which seemed a little strange for this time of year).

One group took a slide of a hummingbird which may have been a black-chinned, however I am still waiting for confirmation.

Atlassers came from Vegreville, Provost, Chauvin, Edgerton, Wainwright, Vermilion and Dewberry. We had a picnic lunch at the farm of Ruth Nelson and were treated to a fly-pass by a nighthawk.

Other Atlassers were able to get out on their own squares and add another 26 species to our count for the weekend.

JASPER-EDSON REGION

It rained!

We organized a priority square bash and campout at the McLeod River Alberta Forest Service site south of Hinton. Ten adults and 10 small children turned out. We got in about 10 hours of observation with a lot of time spent on basic bird identification and tent leak repairs. Between torrential downpours, we recorded 29 species, but only five with confirmed breeding evidence. Three of these, yellow-rumped warbler, chipping sparrow, and Swainson's thrush, were observed carrying large stoneflies from a hatch along the McLeod River. Efforts to confirm a probable golden-crowned kinglet nest in the tall spruce over our campsite proved fruitless – all we got were sore necks and an appreciation for how fast kinglets can move!

MEDICINE HAT REGION

In a letter from Dennis Boresco, Park Interpreter, City of Medicine Hat we received the following: (*Editor*).

We can consider the 1989 Bird Atlas Day an unqualified success. Despite threatening weather we succeeded in spotting 82 species, 30 of which were confirmed as breeders. The program by Geoff Holroyd was, I am sure you will all agree, well worth waiting for.

I would like to thank fellow Atlassers for their skills and interest. I for one am looking forward to next year's Bird Atlas Day.

Gadwall, merlin, long-billed curlew, Forster's tern, mourning dove, western kingbird, horned lark and Brewer's blackbird were just a few of those 30 species confirmed as breeding on this Alberta Bird Atlas Day. ❑

STRATEGIES TO BOOST SPECIES COUNT

Edited from the Indiana Bird Atlas No. 2, March 1986.

With a little planning at the beginning of the year, you can have a good cross-section of species coded within an atlas block. Since the breeding season starts in the winter for a small number of species, atlassing only in mid-June will not fairly reflect the species mix within a block. Therefore, one of the first things on an atlasser's agenda is to plan several short trips to a block beginning in March or before.

Keep in mind that many local birds are building nests and even laying eggs during the heavy migration periods in April and May. I once saw a robin attack a migrant warbler that got too close to its egg filled nest. In this migration season, you **cannot** use the breeding evidence codes for many species in the OBserved, POssible or PRobable categories **but** you **can confirm** species if they are doing

...continued on page 2

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Strategies continued...

things, such as, building nests or sitting on eggs.

In late May, I have walked through a cemetery and found one or more active nests in just about every evergreen. In April, I have walked through woods and hedgerows before the trees foliated to find incubating crows in their stick nests. Confirming nesting birds is often much easier in April and May before the lush summer vegetation hides their activities.

One of the most important items in ones strategy is to realize the importance of investigating different habitat types. Subtle changes in vegetation mix can produce different groups of species.

Please do not discriminate against farmland and urban areas. Horned Lark and Common Nighthawk may not be found except in these restrictive habitat choices.

Atlassers should try to spend some time in each different habitat type within a block at the appropriate time of season. For instance, late and second nesting species are often feeding dependant young in August, and these birds may be confirmed as they feed noisy young. Remember though, some flocking and/or far foraging species, such as horned lark, starlings and blackbirds, move about far from their original nesting areas soon after the young can fly.

Nocturnal species are very hard to find during the day. A few sort nighttime trips can quickly put calling territorial species into the PRobable category. In the evening, plan to be out and waiting at a half hour past sunset. The calls of night species suddenly replace those of daytime species in the twilight. If you do not like the dark, things are **still** plenty active in the remaining twilight. You can get added time by working during periods when the moon is nearly full. In the early morning, nocturnal species are active until about a half hour before dawn.

I hope you will be able to boost your block species total by adding these ideas to your atlassing strategy. ❑

EMH

REGIONAL NEWS

1. Lethbridge Region

Bill Sharp Regional Coordinator (RC) reported that approximately 19 squares were surveyed in his region this year. He also reports some interesting sightings: Teresa and Doug Dolman reported that six young trumpeter swans were seen in June along with sandhill cranes at Police Outpost Lake.

Around Claresholm a number of goodies were reported by Grace Norgard including a red-head woodpecker in June, a singing yellow-breasted chat and in late August a black-throated blue warbler was reported.

Daryl Wig and Dave MacIntyre reported a black-chinned hummingbird in the Crowsnest Pass.

2. Medicine Hat Region

Bob Gardner (RC) had no exceptional species reported this year although some sightings of great loggerhead shrike were made. At least eight loggerheads were seen along two miles of dirt road near the Red Deer River just north of Jenner in early August. Three nests of loggerheads were also found in Suffield within a two hour period.

The region held a two day bird watching course for beginners in early May, a total of 32 people took part. A field trip to Betsy Greenlee's farm found eight people out camping and atlassing.

3. Calgary Region

Bob Storms (RC) reports that atlas cards are still coming in. He also reports that the region acquired four more atlassers this year. Caspian terns sighted at Elinmore for an extended period of time, a singing black-headed grosbeak at Bow Valley Park and one male wood duck were among the highlights for this year.

Next season will be started up with an early workshop to get everyone keyed up for the season.

4. Sylvan Lake/Stettler Region

Myrna Pearman and Lloyd Lohr report a very productive year with increases in numbers of atlassers. Two workshops were held in May by Richard Klauke and sponsored by the Elk's Bird Farm. This region even produced its own newsletter!

On the field trip following the workshop at Eldon Bruns ranch, just west of Rocky Mountain House, an eastern meadowlark was seen by the party. Other interesting birds included a varied thrush east of Red Deer, a Eurasian wigeon, several wood ducks, Sutton's vireo six miles north of Erskine on May 7, and a sharp tailed sparrow sighted near Stettler on May 17.

Actual breeders reported were American avocet young on June 6, Canada goose goslings on May 15, and an alder flycatcher seen on territory on June 7 at Buffalo Lake.

The coordinators would like to thank all atlassers who participated this year particularly Bob Storms and John Thompson of Calgary who helped atlas near Crimson Lake.

5. Vermilion-Wainwright Region

Iris Davies (RC) reports that the cards for this season are still coming in and so far nothing extraordinary has been reported. Forty-five squares were tackled this year and over 50 new atlassers helped out in the region this year.

The region held a number of training programs this year including an identification workshop in March given by Jack Park, another evening identification course held by the Vermilion River Naturalists, and a number of films and a talk by Blair Rippen on hard to identify species.

Iris did say that quite a few turkey vultures were seen throughout the summer around Chauvin but they seemed to spend most of their time across the border in Saskatchewan.

6. Jasper-Edson Region

Rick Bonar (RC) sent in the following report:

The Jasper-Edson Region 6 effort this year was a little disorganized because of the switch of regional coordinators from Kevin Van Tighem to myself, but we managed to get some atlassing done. I recruited three sub-regional coordinators to help, following a good idea originated by Kevin.

Richard Quinlan coordinates activities in the eastern portions of the region and particularly for birders that live in Edson. Andy Raniseth handles the same chores for Jasper. Beth MacCallum helps me out in Hinton. Birders anywhere in the region can contact any of us for information or help.

Atlas cards from this year are just starting to trickle in so I do not have a

lot of information to pass on. Barb and Jim Beck of Edmonton found a Say's phoebe singing on territory near Obed Lake, but we were unable to confirm breeding. U.S. visitors Ellen Johnson and Charlie Adolewski spent 70 hours atlassing a square near Rock Lake. They got 37 species including blue grouse, white-tailed ptarmigan, and golden-crowned sparrow. My own atlassing came up with nests for two accipiters: northern goshawk and sharp-shinned hawk.

The big owls had a good breeding season. There were three groups of great gray owls reported, all with three fledged young. Two great horned owl groups also had three young apiece. But what happened to the red-eyed vireos this year? They were few and far between compared to their normal abundance levels.

There were two bird courses in our region this year. Paul Marshall conducted a very successful series in Edson and got so much interest that the Marshall-Hampson Bird Club is now a going concern. Rainer Ebel conducted a weekend course in Hinton and got some enthusiastic new birders started.

We unfortunately did not get much going for Alberta Bird Atlas Day this year. Ten diehards went square bashing at the McLeod River Recreation Site, but poor weather mostly washed us out. Bigger and better things next year!

7. Edmonton Region

Terry Thormin (RC) reports a relatively quiet summer compared to previous atlas years in terms of interesting species observed.

Between building houses and conducting field work in the arctic and Saskatchewan, Terry and his wife managed to observe a total of 112 species of birds on their quarter section (on the west side of Elk Island National Park) since February.

Among the confirmed breeders were common goldeneye, bufflehead, black-capped chickadee, goshawk and northern oriole.

(Terry, I still have to fill out some casual report forms for you.—Editor).

8. St. Paul-Cold Lake Region

Unfortunately Richard Klauke (RC) was unavailable to provide me with any detailed information for this Regional news update. However, I was able to find out that a whooping crane was sighted in the region this year as well as a black duck at Cold Lake.

9. Grande Prairie-Peace River

Peter Kennedy (RC) reports that a number of interesting species were sighted in the region this year. Of particular interest was that 16 species of warblers were seen in the Region this year. The total was almost 17 but observers were not able to convince a bay-breasted warbler to cross the BC border into Alberta. A male Canada warbler was even seen and heard singing on three different days over three weeks.

Other interesting sightings included four pairs of Leconte's sparrow, two black-backed woodpeckers, 15 Forster's terns, a prairie falcon on the Peace River on July 16 and a mew gull seen by Joan Kerr in the spring.

Seven species of owls, including a northern pygmy owl, (seen and photographed by Jeannie Smith), were also reported in the region this year.

A total of 30 squares were surveyed this season and plans are already underway to prepare for next year.

In the spring, Muskosdepi Park will be putting on an owling program that will be coordinated by Lori Gol. Andi Ranistel is also preparing to put on a number of bird courses as well.

10. Fort McMurray Region

Brad Arner (RC) reports that 11 squares were atlassed this year by 15 atlassers. To date, six out of 20 blocks have been completed. With this region hosting the largest area requiring remote atlassing, Brad urges anyone interested in doing remote area atlassing to give him a call. This is a great opportunity to go canoeing, taking your first small plane ride or maybe even a helicopter ride into some of the most remote sections of Alberta.

Of the species observed, the sighting of a hooded merganser brood, a willow flycatcher pair and continued sightings of Say's phoebe were amongst the most interesting.

The region even had black-billed magpie fledglings as far north as Fort Chipewyan. ❑

REGIONAL COORDINATORS

1. LETHBRIDGE REGION
Bill Sharp
Biology Department
University of Lethbridge
Lethbridge, Alberta T1K 3M4
Phone: 329-2321

2. MEDICINE HAT REGION
Rob Gardner
548-11 Street SE
Medicine Hat, Alberta T1A 1T3
Phone: 529-6225

3. CALGARY REGION
Bob Storms
Apt. 905, 815-14th Avenue SW
Calgary, Alberta T2R 0N5
Phone: 228-4154

4. SYLVAN LAKE-STETTLER
Myrna Pearman
Box 127
Sylvan Lake, Alberta T0M 1Z0
Phone: 346-2211
Lloyd Lohr
Box 1414
Stettler, Alberta T0C 2L0
Phone: 742-2944 or 742-3846

5. VERMILION-WAINWRIGHT
Iris Davies
Box 93
Dewberry, Alberta T0B 1G0
Phone: 847-2677

6. JASPER-EDSON REGION
Rick Bonar
Weldwood of Canada Limited
Hinton Division
760 Switzer Drive
Hinton, Alberta T7V 1V7
Phone: 865-8193 or 865-2251
Residence
192 Collinge Road
Hinton, Alberta T7V 1L5
Phone: 865-5719

7. EDMONTON REGION
Terry Thormin
306, 10630 - 122 Street
Edmonton, Alberta T5N 1M8
Phone: 482-1389
Assistant Coordinator
Gerry Lunn
140 Royal Road
Edmonton, Alberta T6J 2E7
Phone: 435-6212

8. ST. PAUL-COLD LAKE REGION
Richard Klauke
Box 1142
St. Paul, Alberta T0A 3A0
Phone: 636-2148

9. GRANDE PRAIRIE-PEACE RIVER
Peter Kennedy
#105, 8502 - 112 Street
Grande Prairie, Alberta T8V 5X4
Phone: 532-0227

10. FORT McMURRAY REGION
Brad Arner
241 Gladstone Bay
Ft. McMurray, Alberta T9K 1S3
Phone: 791-1696 ❑

Front Row Left to Right: Bruce McGillivray, Mike Kelly, Myrna Pearman,Terry Thormin, Iris Davies. *Back Row Left to Right:* Dave Ealey, Bill Sharp, Rick Bonar, Jack Clements, Peter Kennedy, Richard Klauke, Bob Storms, Rob Gardner.

(Photo: Geoff Holroyd)

COORDINATOR'S WORKSHOP

In March of this year a very successful Coordinators Workshop was held at the Alberta Provincial Museum in Edmonton. Now you have a face to put with the names of coordinators outside your region and others involved with the Bird Atlas. ❑

FUND RAISING— ABA CASH CALENDAR

If you haven't already heard, the Federation of Alberta Naturalists has prepared a fundraising cash calendar for 1990, licenced by The Alberta Gaming Commission, to raise funds for the Bird Atlas.

Five thousand calendars will be printed and sold to the public for $20 each. Anyone purchasing a calendar will be **eligible to win a cash prize on every day of the year.** After winning once, the ticket is returned to the draw and an equal chance remains to win all other draws throughout the year. Each weekday has a $20 prize, each week-end day has a $100 prize and the last day of each month has a $250 prize. Four special days in the year have larger prizes of $500, $750, $950 and $1000 instead of the regular draw. The calendar itself is attractive and contains 13 original ink drawings of Alberta birds, donated by local artist Stephen Spisak. I have enclosed a partial sample of the calendar for your reference.

If you are interested in buying a calendar just contact your regional coordinator or Jack Clements (403-427-1743). Better yet, give Jack a call and offer to sell some calendars for this worthy cause. They are already available to sell or purchase. ❑

CATFISH TO MAMWEE— THE PEACE-ATHABASCA DELTA MEETS FOUR INTREPID ATLASSERS

How do you plan a successful remote atlassing trip? First, you spend weeks arranging for logistical support; organizing an enthusiastic crew; preparing a schedule of activities to help in covering an extensive area reasonably thoroughly, within a short time (one week), and with inclusion of all major habitat types; and writing a successful proposal to the Baillie Foundation for financial assistance. Then you modify your planning to meet last minute circumstances, e.g., recruiting replacement personnel. Finally you arrange for five hot, nearly cloudless days in a row during which to do the bird atlassing. Now that shouldn't be too hard!

Such an achievement was accomplished in early June, 1989, by Brad Arner, the regional coordinator for NE Alberta, and two of his Syncrude colleagues, Hans Boerger and John Retallack. I was lucky enough to take part in this remote trip, as a replacement for others who had to withdraw from participation fairly late in the game.

The remote trip began simply enough with our arrival at the airport several kilometres north of Fort Chipewyan (Ft. Chip). We were met by a wildlife officer from the local Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife (FLW) office. Our first evening was spent in the luxury accommodation of the Ft. Chipweyan Lodge, opened in 1987, with a spectacular view of the southwest end of Lake Athabasca. Starting out in these comfortable surroundings was another example of good planning; we were able to adjust to the new environment, begin birding around the town of Ft. Chip (which overlapped two atlas squares including our major priority square) and make arrangements for outfitting the two boats we were borrowing from the Forestry, Lands and Wildlife office and the Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP) office.

The next day, we departed for our camp site, the location of a former warden station at Quatre Fourches (locally known as Catfish, hence this

article's title). The mouth of the channel that leads to Quartre Fourches beckons invitingly to viewers at Ft. Chip. About 10 km west of the settlement, one reaches the Quatre Fourches – four forks of major delta channels.

The final camp site was chosen for practical and athletic (whoops – I mean aesthetic) reasons, on a south-facing meadow at the top of a small, steep, wooded knoll. In the foreground and just beneath the camp, a vertical cliff-face of an abandoned quarry revealed the solid rock structure of the knoll underlying the thin soil.

The camp, visible from the channel, was situated in a truly picturesque setting, but we also gained the advantage of being able to survey a broad expanse of the delta, which stretched further to the southwest towards Lake Mamawi.

From our camp vantage point we soon realized the character of this portion of the Peace-Athabasca Delta. Our two priority squares (south and north of Quatre Fourches) were dominated by dense, continuous expanses of tall shrubland, mostly willow and alder, and by slightly greater coverage of open sedge fens and sparse willow/sedge meadows. Some cattail marsh was present as well. The most striking features of this region of the delta were the massive ridges and distinct knolls, formed of Precambrian rock outcroppings covered mostly by spruce forest and some mixed wood. These forested islands in a sea of willow and sedge meadow loom impressively above an observer situated at their bases and seem much higher than the maximum heights of merely 100 m. Other features were the open water channels that provided access to representative habitats.

During our boat trips and hikes, we covered from 7 to 13% of the area for four atlas squares, including two priority squares. We found some habitats more difficult than others to penetrate, particularly the willow/alder shrubland; nonetheless, we did venture through representative samples of all types. Travel was easiest by boat along the wide main channels.

Generally, the wide watercourses were muddy and unsuitable for foraging waterbirds and waterfowl, neither of which occurred in sizeable numbers. Channels having little or no current, and open water ponds or bays of Lake Mamawi had the greatest numbers and diversity of the water-oriented birds. We were actually surprised by the relative dearth of such birds in the parts of the delta within our atlas squares.

Most of the dabbling and several diving waterfowl species were observed, but few other waterbirds. Sora were surprisingly abundant, especially in the wet sedge fens; spotted sandpipers were widespread but uncommon. Gulls and terns were observed flying everywhere, occasionally in sizeable groups, but evidence of breeding was rare – only one nest of a herring gull was found on a Lake Athabasca rock island. Franklin's gulls were common, while Bonaparte's gulls were conspicuous by their absence from our squares. The lack of extensive tracts of coniferous muskeg forest from our study area may have accounted for the absence of the Bonapartes. Raptors were quite a thrill to see and included bald eagle, peregrine falcon, sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's hawk, and American kestrel.

The presence of two mourning doves, spotted along the Lake Athabasca shoreline at Ft. Chip, was the most unusual potential range extension noted. However, breeding evidence was not confirmed. Among the songbirds, a fair number of species were noted, but relatively few of these were found on the delta proper. Least flycatchers, red-eyed vireos, Tennessee warblers, yellow warblers, yellow-rumped warblers, clay coloured sparrows and red-winged blackbirds were common in suitable habitats of two or more squares. Tennessee warblers, which sang nearly all day long, were probably the most conspicuous species audibly, and could be relied upon to occur in most habitats. Leconte's sparrows were quite common in some sedge fens. Savannah sparrows were uncommon except in the drier sedge habitats.

We returned to Ft. Chip on the 15th of June, somewhat sunburnt and bug-weary, and spent our final evening in the Ft. Chip Lodge, after blitzing some nearby habitats in the hopes of additional birds and breeding confirmations!

We even persisted and conducted some last-minute searches around Ft. Chip on the morning of our day of departure. As a result, we were rewarded with the discovery of a large poplar tree with simultaneously active nest cavities for an American kestrel pair and northern flicker pair, amongst other sightings.

The true indication of a successful birding trip is more than how many birds one sees, it's whether one would do it again. Well, I'm already planning my trip for next year! South of Ft. Smith has been suggested – anyone interested? ❑

—Dave Ealey

HELP REMOTE AREA PROGRAM

The Remote Area Program is in need of volunteer atlassers to work in some of the remote and inaccessible areas of the province. Over 40 trips are available to choose from and include canoe, horseback, helicopter fly-ins and ATV travel.

If you're interested in atlassing some of these remote squares, contact project headquarters, Jack Clements (427-1743) and we'll send you an information package containing the details you need to choose and prepare for your trip. Some of the highlights include a canoe trip on the Peace River, a hiking trip to a cabin deep in Willmore Wilderness Park and a horseback trip along the Ram River west of Rocky Mountain House. Funding is also available to help you out with some of your costs.

Only two field seasons remain in the project and we want to complete as many remote trips as we can next year, so let us know if you're interested and start making your plans! ❑

BIRD QUIZ

As a new Quiz Master to the Alberta Bird Atlas Newsletter, I would like to introduce you to two of my favorite Alberta breeding species. Through the series of clues provided, in descending order of complexity, are you able to identify each species? If you are unable to identify the species or if you wish to verify your answers, check the next issue of the newsletter. Good luck!

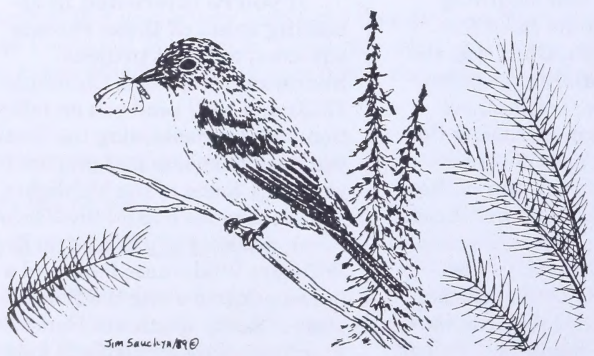
QUIZ #3

- ☐ Length of between 10-12".
- ☐ May be confused with the Merlin but strong black and white face markings and large amount of reddish brown on back and tail distinguish.
- ☐ Nest: Usually in holes in trees about 15-30 feet above the ground but no nest is made. A cliff or abandoned magpie nest may suffice.
- ☐ Eggs: 4-6, cream on buff blotches with brown.
- ☐ Breeding habitat: Alaska, Yukon and southern Canada, south to Central and South America. Winters from northern United States southward.
- ☐ Marked division of labor between the sexes of a breeding pair lasting from 8-12 weeks.
- ☐ Staple foods are insects, mice and voles.
- ☐ Hovering is a distinctive feature.
- ☐ Best known and most widely distributed of all our hawks.
- ☐ Despite its earlier and often recognized name, this specie rarely kills small birds.

QUIZ #4

- ☐ Length of approximately 5 inches.
- ☐ One of last migrants to Alberta.
- ☐ Two molts per year – female colors virtually unchanged but male colors change noticeably.
- ☐ Deep-loop undulating flight pattern is basic territorial flight.
- ☐ Breeding: No inclination to nest until late June.
- ☐ Nest: In upright forks of leafy bushes or trees about 4-20 feet high – about 2 inches in diameter. Made from bark strips, from weeds and vines, filaments from wind – dispersed seeds, webbing from caterpillars and spiders.
- ☐ Eggs: 3-6, very pale blue, unmarked.
- ☐ Female spends up to 95% of her time at the nest during incubation.
- ☐ Food: Thistle and hulled sunflower seeds are common food sources.
- ☐ Personality Description: *pretty*, *friendly*, and *cheerful*.
- ☐ Affectionately referred to as the *little wild canary*.

—*James Hawthorne*



YELLOW-BELLIED FLYCATCHER
Answer to Bird Quiz #1

DIPPER
Answer to Bird Quiz #2

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ALBERTA BIRD ATLAS PROJECT, C/O
Alberta
CULTURE AND MULTICULTURALISM
PROVINCIAL MUSEUM OF ALBERTA
12845 - 102 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
T5N 0M6